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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: A TRIP TO THE EAST: THE ROMA PERSPECTIVE

REF: BRATISLAVA 191

1. Summary. On February 26 and 27 embassy staff traveled to the Presov and Spisska Nova Ves regions to meet with activists, city councilmen, and experts about the causes of the recent unrest in the Roma community (reftel). After the arrival of additional police and military in Eastern Slovakia, Roma looting of grocery stores ceased. The last reported incident was on February 25, the same day Roma politicians called for a nation-wide strike against the new welfare reform, which was not successful. Social workers employed by the Office for the Roma Plenipotentiary speculated that these events could be repeated next month when Roma first receive lower welfare payments. Local leaders stated that the outbreak of looting and protests was a spontaneous event due to a series of reforms that had a severe impact on the Roma community. Overall, Roma activists claimed that the recent events and police actions in Trebisov have diminished recent progress to improve relations between Roma and majority communities. End Summary.

Police Contain Roma Looting

2. On February 26 and 27 two embassy staff members traveled to the Presov and Spisska Nova Ves regions to meet with activists, city councilmen, and experts about the causes of the recent unrest in the Roma community. The area had relatively few incidents, but there was a noticeable police and media presence. After the arrival of additional police and military in Eastern Slovakia, Roma looting of grocery stores ceased. The last reported incident was on February 25, the same day Roma leader Fizik called for a nation-wide strike against the recent welfare system. Small peaceful demonstrations occurred in some towns, but regional leaders appealed to Roma to call off the strike because of the volatile situation with the police. By February 27, 182 Roma (51 men, 96 women, and 35 minors) were accused of robbery or assaulting a police officer. In most cases, prosecutors requested pre-trial custody, which was granted in at least 42 cases. The total estimated damage to equipment, goods, and property was 26,500 USD (847,000 SK). General Prosecutor Dobroslav Trnka opened an investigation into the statements of certain Roma politicians inciting the closure of borders and blockading highways as a method of protest.

3. Plenipotentiary for Roma Affairs Klara Orgovanova expressed concern about the recent police action centered in Trebisov, the largest police deployment in Slovakia after the fall of communism. She stated her office received reports officers entered residences without warrants and complaints of police brutality, which she forwarded to the Ministry of Interior to investigate. Ingrid Zubkova, a Roma activist and education specialist from Trebisov, told police staff she was not allowed to enter some areas heavily populated by Roma and some family and friends feared leaving their homes for work or school. As police joined several Roma activists celebrating a birthday over a bottle of champagne, masked police entered the bar to root out suspects involved in looting. Some Roma felt this regional "show of force" was excessive, however an increase in skinhead attacks targeting Roma that many feared would result did not occur.

The Power of the Media

4. Roma activists stated that one of reasons why looting spread so quickly was the sensationalized reporting on television, the primary source of information in Roma settlements. Ed Conka, a local NGO leader in Levoca, stated he had observed a Czech television crew buying alcohol for several Roma who were later reacting with more vigor than others involved in a strike. The mayor of Levoca later accused the crew of inciting the protest; Ceska Televizia has responded by suing the mayor. The mayor of Bystrany stated the media reported that Roma broke into the local community center, but in reality they were playing soccer. Roma reporters Denisa Havrlova and Daniela Hivesova-Silanova from the monthly Romano Nevo Lil, accused their colleagues from the leading dailies during a recent press conference of contributing to the spread of the looting and ill feelings toward Roma.

The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back

15. Roma councilmen from the Presov area told pol staff the outbreak of looting and unrest was spontaneous. They disavowed that politicians or usurers influenced events. Rather, they were a display of frustrations with the series

of difficult reforms. The culmination of changes in health care payments, the institution of the 19 percent flat tax, and the welfare reform passed in a short time frame have severely affected the Roma community.

16. The elected Roma leaders believed that neither local governments nor Roma communities were prepared for the monumental changes in the welfare system. A councilman from Jarovnice asked why government cuts could not have occurred more gradually to allow local offices to prepare for the institutional changes and allow Roma to adjust their household spending. The discussants spoke mostly about a new monetary bonus given for ten hours of community service a week, which local government and organizations will create jobs and assist qualified recipients to fill them. In areas with small Roma communities, all residents were offered this benefit. However, for the citizens of Jarovnice, with a population of nearly 4,000 Roma, it is more complicated. Several municipalities contacted the local Roma entrepreneur, Jozef Patkan, known for his thriving businesses employing Roma, but he stated that there was more supply than demand.

Nostalgia for Communism and Work

17. It was obvious that the dramatic transition over the last 15 years to democracy and a market economy, so evident in Bratislava, has not taken hold in the East. The Roma councilmen were deeply disappointed with the current government and professed a deep longing to return to the simpler days of communism. They stated they wished to return to the days where you either went to work or to jail. According to noted sociologist Alexander Musinka, many politically active Roma with leadership positions on the local level have never held a job and have lived exclusively on welfare. He confirmed that these Roma will likely vote in the presidential elections for leftist candidates and in favor of the referendum on early elections.

Looting Strains Race Relations

18. Several activists relayed to embassy staff progress in the last few years in the Roma community, such as the election of several mayors and council members in the 2002 local elections. Integrating Roma into the democratic process has not been smooth, but these officials have already done much for their communities. Bystrany, a city that is 80 percent Roma, elected both a Roma mayor and city council. After the election, the non-Roma population appealed to the Ministry of Interior because of fears that the newly elected officials did not have enough basic education. Following the recent events, the non-Roma population again began discussing whether the Roma mayor was competent. Roma activists and the media were refused access to a February 25 "public" meeting on this issue organized by non-Roma. Activists who initially felt the civil unrest could bring needed attention to the Roma problem conceded that it was actually very destructive.

The Dual Face of Usurers

19. While the government placed some of the blame for the Roma unrest on usurers, Roma themselves described a different vision of usury's prevalence and influence. Some usurers were elected to positions in the city council and are well regarded for contributing to their community. Zehra city council members complained the mayor was not communicating with them. They were eagerly awaiting the return of the deputy mayor, who was on "vacation," and was able to cooperate more effectively with the mayor. (We later learned that the deputy mayor was arrested for usury and was due to be released from jail in two weeks.) Social workers commented that while there are reports that usurers are highly influential and occasionally collaborate with the local police, not everyone in the community is beholden to usurers. Peter Polak, former Roma housing advisor to the district of Spisska Nova Ves, stated that usury is a by-product of the current economic situation, which will only be solved with further integration and employment for Roma.

Roma Field Workers Fear Uncertain Future

110. Nearly 50 social workers across Eastern and Southern Slovakia are currently employed through a pilot project

operated by the Office of the Roma Plenipotentiary. The office directly employs 21 workers and foundations and international donors finance the remaining number. Throughout the past year, these workers gained trust in

their communities, began education projects, and in some cases were the only means of communication between the Roma and the non-Roma citizens. In a small office in Velky Saris, Jozef Simonik, a coordinator for the workers, showed on a map the communities where the workers were engaged and where the looting occurred. He proudly commented that there were no problems in their communities and workers sought to manage the peaceful demonstrations. Simonik said he believed the government had adequate warning about the possible effects of the new benefit cuts, but the ministries and policy-makers suffer from not having enough knowledge about the Roma communities and not adequately coordinating policies through the Plenipotentiary's office.

11. The Association of Social Workers and the Ministry of Labor (MOL) formed a working group to discuss guidelines for the workers and the future of the project. According to Roma Plenipotentiary Klara Orgovanova, the MOL agreed to transfer money to the municipalities to employ social workers, however delays may cause the project to run out of funding before the end of March and she can only continue funding a third of the staff. She is confident they will find a solution, but the Association may lose its trained employees due to new job qualifications and the inability of municipalities to pay for new positions.

Comment

12. Our strongest impression after three days of traveling in eastern Slovakia was the extent to which most Roma communities have not participated in the economic or democratic transformation that occurred over the past fifteen years. Additionally, we noted a lack of mechanisms for communication between the two communities, with the exception of certain projects promoting field social work activity. There is no clear leadership behind which Roma can unite, and relying on sensationalized TV coverage for information has proven to have disastrous results. The GOS speaks to Roma leaders that many claim have no constituents.

13. We encouraged our interlocutors to explore new methods to get their message to policy-makers, such as more use of the growing Roma press and increased oversight efforts at the local level. We urged them to continue to build communication between Roma and non-Roma and to demand participation through peaceful means in decisions that affect them. The U.S. mission will continue to promote grass-roots democracy among Roma, and USAID's regional Roma project may also offer training on conflict resolution and other topics.

THAYER

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